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ABSTRACT

A description is provided of the development and outcomes of Central Piedmont Community College's (CPCC's) Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) Project, a campaign designed to use educational technology, volunteer training, and neighborhood centers to provide literacy education. First, background information is presented on CPCC's involvement in adult basic education, and the extent of the illiteracy problem at state and national levels. The next sections trace the development of the ABLE Project, describing CPCC's first proposal for a comprehensive plan to eliminate illiteracy in Mecklenburg County, financial difficulties encountered at the state level and surmounted at the local level, and the research and planning activities that were undertaken. Next, the ABLE Project's first facility is described, indicating that CPCC rented 3,100 square feet of space for a literacy center in a shopping mall and equipped it with microcomputers, videotape players, tape recorders, slide projectors, telephones, and 30 carrels. A description of recruiting activities is followed by a discussion of the operations of the literacy center and the progress made by its students. Next, a discussion is provided on the expansion of ABLE to five additional locations in the county. Finally, concluding remarks suggest that ABLE could be a model for speeding the educational progress of adult illiterates. (LAL)

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THE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAM:

A TECHNOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

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The Adult Basic Education Program:

A Technological Approach to Adult Literacy Education

BACKGROUND

In 1964, Central Piedmont Community College began teaching Adult Basic Education courses that covered elementary reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Other local groups tutoring poor readers were and remain the Charlotte Area Literacy League (CALL) and the Mecklenburg County Literacy Council. All have found progress slower than the growth of the county's population of illiterates. All maintain long waiting lists of prospective students because of the difficulty in recruiting enough volunteer tutors (one for each student).

In 1979, CPCC joined Belk Stores Services, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library, Knight Publishing Company and the Mecklenburg Literacy Council to form Literacy Action of Charlotte, a group seeking new ideas about how to fight adult illiteracy. Since then, CALL, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, (UNCC) and the Urban League have joined Literacy Action.

Meanwhile, the problem outruns the solutions:

--The 1970 census (1980 figures on illiteracy are not yet available) estimated that 50,000 illiterate adults live in Mecklenburg County. Approximately 750,000 live in North Carolina and 23 million in the United States.

--The January/February 1983 Foundation News also reported that "75 percent of the unemployed have inadequate reading and writing skills; so do 85 percent of the juveniles brought before the courts, 90 percent of AFDC mothers, and at least half of all prison inmates ...U.N. statistics report that the United States illiteracy rate is three times that of the Soviet Union and five times that of Cuba."

--A 1979 Ford Foundation study found that programs to educate adult illiterates were reaching less than four percent of them.

--The May 17, 1982 U.S. News and World Report cited estimates that the cost of welfare payments and unemployment compensation fostered by illiteracy is $6 billion annually.

DEVELOPMENT

In 1981, CPCC presented a "Comprehensive Plan to Eliminate Functional Illiteracy in Mecklenburg County." The proposal argued that highly technical industries moving into North Carolina in the 1980's will provide new opportunities for literate citizens. This upward progression in the jobs hierarchy will open jobs that illiterates are unable to fill.

In addition, robots and other forms of automation will mean that the number of jobs requiring only strong backs will diminish. With the economy becoming increasingly service-oriented, white-collar, technical and skilled, the employment outlook for functionally illiterate citizens will be bleak.

The proposal offered a comprehensive plan to eliminate illiteracy using educational technology, volunteer tutoring and neighborhood centers. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte endorsed the plan and joined in a request for state funding to implement it.

However, the proposal reached the state in the midst of a revenue crisis for North Carolina. In fiscal years 1981 and 1982, because of a nationwide recession, the state collected less revenue than had been expected. State agencies, including community colleges, had to return to the treasury parts of their budgets to help the state meet its obligations.

CPCC determined to raise money for the project on its own. In mid 1982, it produced a 13 minute video tape "The Economic Time Bomb". It was a valuable tool when college officials spoke to civic clubs, church groups, Mecklenburg legislators, County Commissioners and industry/business leaders about the seriousness of the problem of adult illiteracy.

ACTION

Funding

By the spring of 1983, community concern about illiteracy and support for the project was increasingly evident. On March 7, the Mecklenburg County Commissioners voted to allocate $100,000 to CPCC for the project if the college could raise the balance of $203,000 for the total $303,000 start-up cost.

The Philip L. Van Every Foundation of Charlotte and the Knight Foundation, established by the founders of Knight Newspapers (now Knight Ridder) each donated $25,000. First Union Bank contributed $10,000. Other companies have made smaller contributions. ABLE is now a department of CPCC and state funding is generated by student attendance.

Planning

In the spring of 1983, Dr. Terilyn Turner, head of CPCC's Reading, Speech and Foreign Languages Department, was assigned to complete planning for the project, called the Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) Project. Dr. Turner, with other CPCC reading experts, began to research teaching techniques and to evaluate microcomputer software, television programs, videotapes and other materials designed to educate the illiterate.

Project planning included meetings with reading experts at the University of Minnesota and Control Data Corportion which, with the University of Illinois and the National Science Foundation, has invested $700 million in developing educational computer programs. Research shows that Control Data's basic skills programs can raise a child one grade level in reading in 20 hours and one grade level in math in 25 hours.

By comparison, at least 50 hours of tutoring are needed to raise an adult one grade level; elementary school children study daily for 180 days to advance a grade level. In Adult Basic Education classes offered by N.C. Community Colleges, students work 150 hours to move up one grade level.

Planners also reviewed computer software at the N.C. Department of Public Instruction and software manufactured by the Commodore and Apple computer companies. They reviewed educational programs developed by CPCC, CBS TV, the University of Kentucky and the N.C. Rural Renaissance Consortium, a group of community colleges that produce sound/slide instructional programs.

Decisions on a project site and recruitment of students were made by an advisory committee of community leaders: John Harrison of the Greater Charlotte Chamber of Commerce; Phyllis Lynch, Mecklenburg Elections Board Chairperson and neighborhood activities; the Reverend Bob Freeman representing local ministers; the Reverend Bob Walton representing ministers and the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners; Jeanne Bohn of WSOC and Do Fleck of Knight Publishing Company representing the media; Richard Hicks of Belk Stores Services; Merlene Wall of the Mecklenburg Department of Social Services; LaForest Williams and Bob Davis of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools; and, attorney Charles Jones. Most of the committee members had shown interest in the problem of adult illiteracy or worked with literacy groups before.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education endorsed CPCC's plan and agreed to help with its implementation.

Equipping

CPCC rented 3,100 square feet of space for a literacy center in Freedom Mall adjacent to CPCC's West Area Learning Center. This new center housing the ABLE project was planned to include 16 microcomputers, five videotape players, ten tape recorders, ten slide projectors with tape players, five telephone lines and 30 carrels.

Recruiting

CPCC invited students to the center through public service announcements on radio and television and through personal appeals by recruiters. Flyers were sent in 11,000 food stamp mailings and scheduled for enclosure in August water bills in hopes that illiterate recipients had friends or family members who could read the announcements.

The college wrote ministers and community leaders asking them to encourage illiterate citizens they knew to visit the center. Print and broadcast reporters published news stories before the center's opening on July 18, 1983.

Since then, periodic news stories, public service announcements, speeches to civic clubs, mailings to churches and talk show appearances have served to recruit students and volunteers.

Operating

The first day the center was open, 200 people visited. Seventy-seven enrolled in ABLE and another 50 were referred to other services more appropriate for their educational levels, such as CPCC's high school equivalency programs. The second day of the center's operation, another 20 students enrolled.

This outpouring of students was approximated only by the 70 community volunteers who showed up to be trained for center work on July 16. The five paid staff members had expected a maximum of 25 volunteers.

Since then, the number of ABLE students has grown to over 1600 and the number of volunteers to 200. Volunteer recruiting and training are conducted periodically.

CPCC receives many requests from institutions and departments of education interested in seeing the center and planning their own ABLE projects.

A student's progress through the center begins at its doorway, where a continuous slide show explains ABLE's mission, depicts its equipment and introduces its staff. Volunteers invite visitors to discuss their educational histories and goals.

If a visitor's educational level is below ninth grade skills, he or she is invited to work regularly at the center and is assigned to an instructor. (If other skill levels are demonstrated, such as high school level or learning disabilities, the visitor is referred to other appropriate services.)

Instructors assign students to educational media and test their progress periodically.

Students whose skills are at fourth grade level or below receive considerable individual tutoring. Also, they learn from such computer software packages as one by Apple that forms a crossword puzzle. With this package, instructors write clues and answers for the puzzle to teach words and meanings that students are learning.

Other computer lessons for students at or below fourth grade level deal with multiplication, spelling, vowels, consonants, alphabetization, word roots and affixes, antonyms and synonyms and more.

Students whose skills are at the fourth grade through eighth grade level learn mainly through the use of various technological delivery systems, with encouragement from instructors. Bill Cosby appears on TV teaching reading and vocabulary.

PLATO, the name assigned to the Control Data software, guides students through math lessons and games of hangman that teach vocabulary. Similar computer lessons with graphics as captivating as those on video games instruct students in other stages of reading and math.

Some 160 slide/sound programs from the Rural Renaissance Consortium help students learn to read while they also absorb such useful information as how to use the job want ads, fill out an application, interview for a job, balance a checkbook or buy a home.

Once students have mastered eighth grade material, they may go on to CPCC's high school completion or general education development (high school equivalency) programs.

Results

By late 1983, some ABLE students on the basis of standardized pre and post tests had bettered Control Data's data on the rate of student progress. One student had progressed from fourth to ninth grade level in reading in 32 hours; another made the same progress in 39.5 hours. A third student moved from fourth to seventh grade level in math in 66 hours.

Ninety-five percent of the students were from Mecklenburg County. Sixty-eight percent had not completed high school, while 26 percent reported that they were high school graduates. Forty-seven percent were employed and 53 percent were unemployed. About three-fourths of the students were black and slightly more women were enrolled than men. The average age of the students was 36.

Expansion

The original ABLE center opened in the Freedom Mall shopping center to 200 students. Today the program has expanded to an additional five locations in the community.

In July of 1984, an eight by forty-two foot mobile van was equipped with eight microcomputers, a videotape player and four computer-controlled audio tape players. The van was located adjacent to the Double Oaks Community Service Center, where it was used in conjunction with a classroom facility 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Monday through Wednesday. On Thursday and Friday the van was located at a Lutheran Church, where it served adults in a racially mixed neighborhood near a low income predominantly black area. These sites were chosen after demographic studies indicated a need for basic literacy education in those areas.

By January of 1985, the Double Oaks center had outgrown the capacity of the mobile van. At the same time, the Department of Correction requested an ABLE center at the Camp Greene minimum security prison. The Double Oaks center was expanded by using an additional classroom for the computers and other equipment to serve the over 100 students enrolled. The mobile van was relocated at the Camp Greene site Thursday through Saturday and used in conjunction with a small trailer which served as a chapel on Wednesday evenings. The program, using the mobile van, continued at the Lutheran Church facility Monday through Wednesday.

After a year at the Lutheran Church, it was found that ABLE's target population, the lower income black community, was not taking advantage of the program; only about forty adults, majority white, were enrolled. Interviews with students indicated that the black population was not interested in participating in the program while it was located in a white church, thus a new location in a predominantly black neighborhood was sought.

At the request of a Salvation Army Community Center director, the ABLE staff began recruiting in that area to see what potential the site might have for an ABLE program. Participants at the Lutheran Church site were willing to move to the new site, and a number of potential students were identified. In July, 1985, the ABLE mobile van was relocated at the Salvation Army Community Center

site Monday through Wednesday. Attendance doubled within two weeks.

The success of the ABLE program was evident through its growing enrollments at each of the four sites. Enrollments outgrew the operating capacity at the Camp Greene prison site and in addition, the facility supervisor requested pre-GED for the inmates.

The North Carolina State Legislature purchased and distributed Texas Instruments computer terminals and PLATO software to the 58 community college system institutions. This additional hardware and courseware allowed further expansion of the ABLE program.

On October 1, 1985, the ABLE mobile van was moved to the Camp Greene location to remain on an experimental basis and operate six days per week in order to provide not only basic skills instruction, but also pre-GED instruction. The Salvation Army Community Center site was equipped with hardware and made a stand-alone site three days per week. ABLE hardware and courseware were placed at the Huntersville Meck II facility to supplement the adult basic education classes offered there. Eight computers were placed in the Learning Resources Center on the college campus in the Basic Studies lab to support the ABE classes on campus and to offer an alternative delivery of instruction to students who preferred a more independent, technological approach.

The ABLE program has served over 1600 students since its opening. Over 250 volunteers have worked with ABLE students as tutors. Each quarter the program enrolls 500 to 600 adults, and the numbers are growing! With a $50,000 grant from First Union National Bank and a matching grant from the North Carolina Community College System, five North Carolina colleges are replicating the ABLE project.

Conclusion

CPCC's ABLE project is a program that seeks to combat adult illiteracy by amassing an array of educational media and teaching techniques in one location. ABLE could become a model for the nation in speeding educational progress of adult illiterates, removing the burdens they place on society and enhancing their chances for success.

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